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The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and the Memories: A Historical Outline of Colonial and Post-Colonial Reminiscences

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Abstract

Constructed in the early 1880s to facilitate the rapid journey from Siliguri to Darjeeling, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is now recognised as a World Heritage Site. After the 1879 monsoon, work on this historic railway was started. In 1881, the Darjeeling Steam Tramway Company was founded. The business renamed itself the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Company on September 15, 1881. On July 4, 1881, the railway was finished. On March 4, 1881, Viceroy of India Lord Lytton gave it his official inauguration. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is distinguished by a few special, innovative technological advances. For many white colonial Englishmen, women and native people, riding the railway has always brought back nostalgic feelings. American Author Mark Twain experienced one of the best railway rides of his lifetime when he travelled on the railway. Rumer Godden had her experiences of this toy train riding. BBC reporter Mark Tully developed a strong obsession with the railway, and Parimal Bhattacharya recounted his grandfather's experiences on the railway. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's Toy Trains hold a special place in Darjeeling's emotional history, influencing people from colonial Sahibs, Memsahibs, and Bengali Babus to post-colonial Bengali Intelligentsia. The railway's heritage and way of life are inextricably linked, with travellers and mountain lovers bringing Darjeeling's essence to life.

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Introduction

UNESCO designated the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway as a World Heritage Site on December 2, 1999. However, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's romance and nostalgic charm extend back to Colonial India's early 1880s. The trip to Darjeeling is romantic and nostalgic because there are many memoirs and first-hand stories available about the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. Everybody's passion and affection for Darjeeling began with their ride on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, from Colonial Sahib and Memsahib to Colonial Babu. Apart from that, many colonial Englishmen and women who spent their disciplined and monotonous childhoods in the several convent boarding schools located in Darjeeling and the surrounding areas found only comfort in the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. Many Bengali gentlemen, ladies, and their families discovered their puja, or summer vacation romance, in Darjeeling even after India's freedom, and the

Darjeeling Himalayan Railway served as their initial link to this romance. However, we must first discuss the history of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, which dates back to the late 1800s, before delving into the extensive catalogue of sentimental recollections associated with the route.

Genesis of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway

Punkhabarrie Road could not handle the amount of traffic that had increased to the hill station by the 1860s. For this reason, the Hill Cart Road was built in 1861 to provide a rapid and easy Tonga service to Darjeeling. But it still took over fifteen days to go from Calcutta to Darjeeling. The itinerary included travelling 219 miles by rail on the East India Railway to Sahibgunj, then taking a steamer across the Ganga to Karigola, then travelling again by bullock cart across the river to the opposite side of Dingra Ghat for another crossing, and finally travelling once more by bullock cart of palaki to

Siliguri, from where the climb to Darjeeling started. Darjeeling's reputation as a health resort and hill station was well-established by the 1870s. However, the trip from Calcutta still required two weeks of intense travel. The privately owned East Bengal Railways only operated the line as far as Goalundo (which is now in Bangladesh). They declined to continue the line to Siliguri. As a result, 210 miles of railway had to be built by the government-owned Northern Bengal Railways to connect Sara Ghat on the other side of the Ganges to Siliguri. However, the Darjeeling hills were out of reach for both the East Bengal Railways and the Northern Bengal Railways. After that, Franklin Prestage visited Darjeeling in 1878 while serving as an agent for the East Bengal Railways. A railway line would be far more comfortable than the existing two-day Tonga and Bullock Cart travel from Siliguri, he suggested to his higher authorities. He proposed to the government that Darjeeling Hill may benefit from various transportation advantages if a privately operated train was built in the hills. The concept was initially in problems for some silly reasons, but over time all of the criticisms were resolved. The government at last approved the establishment of the Darjeeling Steam Tramway Company on April 8, 1879. On September 15, 1881, two years later, the company changed its name to the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Company. The railway line's construction got underway after the 1879 monsoon. The twenty-mile section between Siliguri and Tindharia was finished by March 1880. It was a challenging assignment because there was no prior railway line laying experience in the highlands, so the engineers had to be creative in their approach. The train line travelled a further 11 kilometres by August 1880 to arrive at Kurseong town. In February of 1881, Sonada was connected. After Ghoom was connected in April 1881, the railway lines eventually arrived at Darjeeling on July 4, 1881.

The Inaugural Imperial Ride

On March 4, 1881, the Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton, opened the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, covering the first section of the route up to Tindharia. The opening of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was the subject of an intriguing tale. The residents of Tindharia were a little anxious on the day of the inauguration, which involved the Viceroy's trip from Siliguri to Tindharia. Since it became the honour and responsibility of the Tindharia people to greet the Viceroy of India. They were officially told to bring their musical instruments and to arrive dressed in traditional costumes. No one was allowed to leave or head home until the Viceroy passed through, according to orders given by the locals, who gathered at the Tindharia Station early in the morning and lined both sides of the road. It was taught to the villagers to shout slogans like "Long live Queen Victoria," "Long live Lord Lytton," and "Long live the Viceroy." However, despite the long wait from the entire Tindharia, the Viceroy's train never arrived. Because the train's departure from Siliguri was delayed owing to technical issues. These technological issues were not mentioned in detail in the official reports. Nonetheless, some unofficial reports or rumours claim that the Viceroy Lord Lytton and Vicereine Lady Lytton's massive and weighty luggage was too much for the train's little engine to pull the imperial carriage. The Viceroy and Vicereine's luggage was eventually removed from the train and placed on horses, porters, and bullock carts. After the train's weight was sufficiently decreased, the small engine managed to pull the carriages with the guests of honour and proceeded towards Tindharia. The exhausted and starving locals had the chance to shout

their slogans since it was becoming late in the day. The reason the chants rang happy was not because the Viceroy had shown up, but rather because they could now return home and take care of their affairs.

Unique Engineering Features

The building of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is defined by three of the most revolutionary engineering concepts. The building of the "double loop" at Chunabhatti and the "single loop" at Agony Point provided a solution to the major problem, which was the rather steep gradient. Years later, the "Batasia Loop" would be constructed using the same methodology.

Initially, Herbert Ramsey, the contractor, had trouble aligning the track with the steep gradient. However, the notion of a reverse track came from his wife. When a dancing couple found themselves in a tight spot during a ballroom dance, they were allowed to go backwards. With the creation of the first "Z reversals," or "zig-zags," the issue of an uncontrollable gradient was resolved.

The third distinctive feature of this railway is that there isn't a single tunnel up to 7200 feet above sea level (Ghoom Station). But a tiny tunnel had to be built above Chunabhatti because of the landslides brought on by the devastating earthquake of 1934, and it was once more the default following the landslides in Darjeeling in 1968.

Memories from an American Author Sahib

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway has also made a stunning nostalgic recapitulation in the memory of many people who had experienced this mountain railway ride, thanks to its unique engineering style and the aforementioned dramatic genesis. This heritage railway recapitulation tradition continued from colonial to post-colonial eras. After a decade of inaugural imperial ride by this toy train, prominent American Author Mark Twain came to India. When he travelled on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, he experienced one of the best railway rides of his lifetime. He recollected that in the afternoon of a February day, he switched from the normal train to a tiny toy train with a canvas cover that skimmed the surface and appeared to travel at a speed of fifty miles per hour when they were only travelling twenty. Each car could accommodate six people in its seats, and when the curtains were drawn, one was essentially outside enjoying the view, the breeze, and an elegant ride. In actuality, it was more than just a name-only pleasure trip. Mark Twain relished the scenery along the way, including the region's flora and fauna, ribbon-like roads and paths, Mountain Rivers, and clouds. They created a tremendous deal of enthusiasm in the writer's recollections. Following their departure, they made their first stop at a small wooden station coop that was situated just beyond the shadowy jungle's edge. The area was surrounded by a thick, deep forest of large trees, brush, and vines. Wild elephants and the unpredictable, ferocious royal Bengal tigers tormented the jungle. Mark Twain saw seven wild elephants cross a railway track at one location. It took eight hours for the railway to travel forty miles up the mountain. According to him, the journey should have taken a week because it was so fascinating, wild, and enchanting. Mark Twain reported that the train entered a dense mist at an altitude of 6,000 feet, blocking out the earth and keeping it that way. The train then ascended one thousand feet before starting to descend to the Darjeeling railway station, some 6,000 feet above the plains' level. On his journey back from Darjeeling, he took a more

exciting route to the plains of Bengal. Upon reaching the summit after five miles on the standard toy train, he disembarked and boarded a small handcar covered by canvas for the 35-mile descent. He was filled with an unfathomable sense of excitement on this adventure. The handcar flew down the mountainside, making multiple stops. It eventually came to a stop in the plains, where he was met by the normal train heading to Calcutta. That was, in his own words, the best day he ever had on earth. No vacation destination compared to that flight down from the Himalayas in a handcar for thrilling, tingling and heavenly delight.

Memories from a Colonial English Memsahib

Rumer Godden wrote about her experience travelling the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in her memoir *Rungli-Rungliot*. Rumer Godden spent a year during the Second World War at Rungli-Rungliot, a remote tea estate located 3,000 feet below Darjeeling, along with her two daughters, their nanny, and four Pekinese dogs. She left Calcutta on a July night, according to her account, in a train that rolled and groaned its way northward over Bengal until the morning, when it dropped her off at a small town (Siliguri), which was next to a forest that was dripping with rain. There, she boarded a different train (the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway), which sounded like it was at an amusement park, and headed its way through the forests and into the Himalayan foothills. The carriage dripped both inside and outside, as did the trees, the hanging orchids, the creepers, and the ground at the edge of the track. She admired the sights of the snow-capped peak Kabru, the gorge of the mountains, and the majestic Teesta River from the train's window. The miniature train then halted and resumed in her recollections, emitting smoke and noise that were significantly larger than its actual size. The engine was painted spinach green, with a big, flat-topped funnel and bulging coal bunkers. A coolie perched on the ledge in front of the engine, periodically stepping off to walk. The first-class and second-class carriages were packed to capacity; people were sitting on the ledges of the windows, on top of the luggage, on top of each other, and out of the cracks and crevices were children, hens, and bags. Rumer Godden noticed the strong fragrance of biris (locally manufactured cigarettes) from her lonely window seat. After many hours, the train reached its destination—a group of tin-roofed huts in the middle of the forest—and looped around the loop, crossing a red bridge over another river with deep fish pools. Rumer Godden did not specify the name of the station, but based on her description, we can assume it is either Ghoom Station or Batasia Loop.

Memories from a Colonial English Childhood

The renowned BBC reporter Mark Tully, who attended Darjeeling's Convent boarding school as a child, developed a strong obsession with the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. The relocation to Darjeeling occurred because his European guardians believed that the humid environment of Calcutta posed a health risk to young children. Typically, Mark Tully and his fellow boarders began their journey from Sealdah via the Darjeeling Mail. Following their arrival in Siliguri the following morning, they discovered a special train of the two-foot gauge Darjeeling Himalayan Railway waiting for them. A few parents made arrangements for their kids to drive up the Darjeeling hill. Gillanders Arbuthnot managing agency took over as the operator of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. One of the senior executives (burra-sahib) of this managing agency was Mark Tully's father. Therefore, his first

and only option for getting to Darjeeling was the train operated by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. And he didn't feel bad about it. The train to Darjeeling hasn't changed much since 1941. Massive clouds of black smoke billowed from the valiant engines, which could reach a top speed of twelve miles per hour. Travellers without tickets posed a serious issue for this railway. Except for first-class passengers, the majority of the passengers were locals, and they routinely boarded and alighted from the railway's slow-moving trains. Growing older, Mark Tully joined his older classmates in leaping off the train at the zig-zags, where the gradient was too great for a straight assault and the train shifted backwards before continuing forwards. For lunch, the train paused at Kurseong. After that, it eventually arrived at Ghoom, the line's highest station at 7407 feet. From Siliguri, the 47-mile journey took the most of the day. With its exhausted engine, it finally arrived at the Darjeeling station, where Mark Tully and his companions took in the breathtaking vista of the snow-covered Kanchenjunga. Throughout his monotonous boarding school life, Mark Tully experienced constant homesickness. However, because he took the train on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, he did not have car sickness. Consequently, The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway played a crucial part in his memories of Darjeeling. Depicting the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway as a "toy train" caused even Mark Tully to react strongly. He said that he and many others were taken on a deadly serious journey via that train. Unfortunately, these days it's just a tourist attraction and a way to go around for people who don't want to pay the bus fee. Perhaps this is the limitation of the modern day's so-called 'Progress'.

Memories from a Colonial Bengali Babu

Parimal Bhattacharya, the renowned author of "No Path in Darjeeling Is Straight," recounts his grandfather's experiences on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. He had come to Darjeeling in the early 1940s as a government witness in a money order fraud case while working as a postmaster in a district town in colonial India. Parimal Bhattacharya's grandfather (dadu) spent two weeks in Darjeeling for investigation, and he has deep memories of that time. His grandfather set out on the journey by Darjeeling Mail from Calcutta. Upon arriving at Siliguri at precisely 5:06 a.m., he observed that the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's toy train was waiting for him across the platform. With its blue toy engine bearing the Glasgow firm's emblems, Messers Sharpe, Stuart and Co., the narrow-gauge fairytale train was packing steam in its boiler. This was where his love affair with Darjeeling would begin. His train to Darjeeling had stopped in Sukna so that the engine could be filled with water. When he had first come onto the platform as a young man in the 1940s, he had noticed two grey rabbits on a grassy patch a few yards away. Starting from Sukna, the Terai Forest was overrun by tigers and leopards. Starting from Sukna, the forest of sturdy saal trees (*Shorea robusta*) came to an end close to the next station, Rongtong. British engineers loved using the wood from the saal tree for building sleepers on railway tracks. The pristine staccato sounds of the saal-wood sleepers beneath the carriage wheels lent nostalgic glamour to historical railway journeys. He had observed a steel cage at the Rongtong station, which served as a trap for capturing leopards. The train passed through the third loop on the track above Rongtong and came to a stop at Chunabhatti station, named after the limestone-producing lime quarry where it was found. Following Chunabhatti, the ascent grew harder and the

renowned reversal started. The train went into reverse for a short distance on a branching track that proceeded along an incline. After that, it accelerated rapidly and was driven up the climb. The train then gracefully wandered down the twisted hillside, making stops at Tindharia, Ghaiyabari, and Paglajhora en route. It arrived at Kurseong abruptly at 10:18 a.m., when a steaming hot, delicious breakfast was provided at the station's railway refreshment buffet. Parimal Bhattacharya's grandfather was an Anglicised English-educated man, but in ceremonial terms, he was a Kannujia Brahmin. He skipped the English breakfast that was provided at Kurseong station because of this. He had purchased fresh yoghurt made from yak's milk from a Bhutia vendor, which he combined with the pressed rice he had brought from Calcutta. However, his English Sahib Boss finished off his delicious English breakfast with baked beans, fried bacon, sausages, and poached eggs. For a Bengali Babu living in Colonial Bengal, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway took on a romantic quality of its own. During the colonial era, Bengali Bhadrals (English-educated native gentleman) frequently harboured romantic feelings for Darjeeling and its Heritage toy train. This type of unaltered romanticism continued among Bengali upper-middle-class educated households even after independence in the early post-colonial era.

Memories from a Post-Colonial Upper-Middle-Class Bengali Boy

When India gained its independence, Sanjoy Mookerjee recalled many train trips and railway stories, and he mentioned how difficult it was to get to Darjeeling. The journey from Calcutta to Siliguri took more than one night, even in the early 1960s. It required over twenty hours. The majority of the original railway route fell under East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh, after the partition. On the Indian side of the Ganges, the barrage at Farakka remained inoperable. Therefore, to get to North Bengal, visitors had to take a big steam ferry operated by the Railways from Sakrigali Ghat on the south bank of the river to Manihari Ghat on the north. Before the famous Darjeeling Mail was restored via the new route, mail to North Bengal was also transported by express trains. On the north bank, one had to board a metre gauge train, although the voyage to the south side was made by broad gauge. At last, one could ascend the hills at Siliguri by the charming, small gauge "Toy Train," which was adored by all. Sanjoy Mookerjee recalled his early years and the trip to Darjeeling he had with his parents on the Toy Train. He claimed that upon reaching Siliguri, his family was greeted by red-shirted porters who had helped them carry their bags to the legendary "Toy Train." When Sanjoy Mookerjee was younger, his happiness had no bounds, and the Toy Train began to feel like a means of transportation through a fantasy country. After taking the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's Toy Train, he achieved a childhood dream. Four steam engines with smoke emerged from the shed and headed in the direction of the Toy Train one by one. The Train had two engines, one in the front and one at the rear. The train began to move at the exact moment when the guard's whistle blew and the engines hooted.

The railway alignment joined the Hill Cart Road next to the town of Siliguri after passing it. The view of green tea gardens and the rhythm of the female labourers working in the garden was expansive on the other side. The image gradually blended into the neighbouring hills, valleys, and streams, creating a lovely tapestry. Racing the vehicles that travelled along the Hill Cart Road—including cars, buses, and land-

rovers—was a lot of fun. However, all of the cars on Hill Cart Road left the old locomotive behind because of their average speed of twenty miles per hour. The train left Siliguri and arrived in Sukna, where the actual ascent of the mountains started, an hour later. The two longer trains that had originated at Siliguri were divided into four groups, each consisting of three coaches and a brake van, to be pulled up by a single locomotive. The so-called "shunting" process took about thirty minutes. During this occasion, the local village folks at Sukna station sell aromatic Darjeeling tea and tasty local food to little Sanjoy Mookerjee and his parents. At last, the recently fueled and watered mountain trains were prepared to start climbing the hill. The first train was signalled by the station master with a green flag. The trains would follow one another for ten minutes between each other because this stretch had only one line. The author and his family had to wait an additional twenty minutes for the train to depart because they were on the third train. The train eased onward into the thick forest, and then the panorama of hillsides, cascades, and waterfalls was revealed by the twisted and turned-around railway track. Through the viaducts, bridges, and excavated railway cuttings, the Toy Train continued its journey. Its puffing engine produced a rhythmic, pleasant sound as it travelled through the woods. The sound of the engine brought the forest to life. Screaming loudly, families of baboons and monkeys climbed the lofty branches, carrying babies. Rushes of birds rose into the air, adding to the chaos, and the tall boughs overhead produced a rain of leaves. The author had never been to the woods before as a child. That's why He was in a state of total amazement due to the sounds and overall beauty of the jungle. The train continued to rise higher, and the trees got smaller over time. Tiny hamlets and tea estates stood out from the valley and mountainside. The passengers were playing hide-and-seek with the curving road. Local boys and girls leapt onto the train's footboards to catch free rides to school while carrying their school bags. They said goodbye to other passengers as they disembarked from the train close to their school. At approximately midday, the train arrived at Tindharia station, which is situated on a hill and provides a breathtaking view of the plains below. The surrounding wild environment gave rise to towering birch and pine trees. There was a strange swishing sound as the chilly wind surged over them downhill. It got steeper on the climb past Tindharia. The historic locomotive of 1907 arrived at Kurseong station gradually but steadily. Traditions and rules said that this was the official lunch stop. Following lunch, the author's train was connected to a new engine which led it to proceed in a different direction. Vehicles and passersby on Hill Cart Road came to a stop to give the Toy Train honour for releasing the massive amount of black smoke. Nevertheless, the locals made sure to wave and smile at the travellers. The train left the author with lifelong recollections of wonderful experiences after passing through the noisy town and cacophony of urban life, as well as the valley of tea gardens with some unique names like "Margaret's Hope" and evergreen mountains.

The weather abruptly changed after a while. Fog and mist enveloped the train. The author learned about the Darjeeling weather's ability to play hide-and-seek from his school buddies during his early years. After a while, the mist and fog started to lift, revealing what lay ahead—green hills. Shining in the deep blue sky was the mighty Kanchenjunga peak, covered in snow. The sight of Kanchenjunga delighted the passengers. After that, the train accelerated and arrived at Ghum, the highest railway station in India, in the late

afternoon. It eventually arrived at Batasia Loop after passing by the historic Ghum Monastery. Through Batasia Loop the whole expanse of the Kangchenjunga Massif came into view. The snow of Kangchenjunga changed shade from white to yellow to pink as the sunset. However, the train left without waiting for sunset and headed towards Darjeeling, its ultimate destination. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's Toy Train arrived at the Queen of the Hills stations at dusk, just as the night sky began to light up like a million fireflies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we may state that The Toy Trains of The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway hold a special place in Darjeeling's emotional history. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's distinctive heritage nature has left a lasting impression on people ranging from colonial Sahibs, memsahibs and Bengali Babus to post-colonial Bengali intelligentsia. The history and way of life of Darjeeling are inextricably linked to The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. Travellers and mountain lovers from all over the world always bring Darjeeling's essence to life with their recollections of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. For this reason, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's Toy Train has always come to represent Darjeeling's identity. The romance and films of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway are not to be missed. From Bollywood films like *Aradhana* to many other national and international movies, music videos, web series and personal vlogs on YouTube. Many foreign and Bengali tourists still enjoy taking rides on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's Toy Train, which helps preserve their memories of Darjeeling even in the twenty-first century.

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